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ABSTRACT

This study examined what secondary students had learned from the television film "The Day After"--a dramatization of the possibility of nuclear war and its horrible consequences--and how they responded to it emotionally. A pre-test and two post-tests (one administered the day after students viewed "The Day After" and a second one administered two months later) were administered to students in grades 5, 6, 9, and 12. Most senior high students viewed the film with family and friends; the younger groups watched predominantly with their families. Most parents talked with their offspring about the film. Regarding the effects of nuclear warfare, students in grades 5 and 6 do not think that a nuclear war would be as devastating as the older students think it would be. Although the senior high group answered more knowledge questions correctly than did the younger students, the responses of all groups were reasonably accurate. The amount students thought they had learned from the film decreased with grade level. Elementary students rated the film higher than did the senior high students. (RM)

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Young Persons View "The Day After"

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Last fall, we suddenly seemed closer to nuclear warfare than we had been since the days of fallout shelters and the Cuban missile crisis. One movie about nuclear war and its' aftermath was playing in the local theaters; another was about to premier on national television. These films seemed to be more mirror than entertainment. The President was talking about "catching up to the Russians" and a strong defense. The Russians accused Reagan of war-mongering and escalation. The vocabulary of the late fifties and early sixties was dusted off and updated. The intensity seemed particularly high in Lawrence, Kansas; it became the epicenter of "The Day After" and the focus of the attention directed toward the movie.

People were interested and concerned, first about the threat of war raised by all the talk, second about the impact of the impending film. School officials across the country called their counterparts in Lawrence and asked what they recommended about letting children watch the film. There were guesses, but no one knew. The only information was from those few who had seen the large screen premier: it had had impact on the viewers. The best solution seemed to be to study the horse as it left the barn; perhaps we'd have a better idea the next time. We quickly prepared to ascertain students' views of nuclear war and of the film "The Day After".

During the week of November 15, we pretested groups of young people, asking them how they felt about living with the threat of nuclear war. On November 20,1893, "The Day After" premiered on national television, accompanied by great fanfare. On November 21, we administered our second round of questions. That same day the mass media told us and probably our participants that the movie had been more fan than fare. Undaunted, we administered a third round in January.

We had suspected that the pollsters and the media would provide instant feedback on reactions to the film, so we concentrated on attitudes about the threat of nuclear war. However, We did include questions about the film, particularly in the third administration. We also attempted to determine if the participants learned from the film as well as how they responded to it emotionally. We reasoned that, if the film was to have any positive benefits, viewers would have to learn something about nuclear war and its consequences. Today we will focus on the responses to the film and hold the data on attitudes about war until another time.

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Method

Subjects. The students participated in 1-3 repetitions of the survey. About half the sample at each level took the pretest and all who were in class the day a test was given took the second and third. As a result the numbers are different for each test. The number taking the third test, which is the one that will be discussed today, is 94 (44 female and 50 male) fifth and sixth-grade, 104 (53 females and 51 males) ninth and 257 (127 females and 130 males) twelfth-grade students.

Procedure. The questionnaires were prepared in classroom packets, and the teachers administered all questionnaires. The first was given to approximately half the classes at each level during the week prior to the premier of the film "The Day After"; the second was given in all classrooms the day after the premier, and the third was given to all classes 6-8 weeks later.

Instructions were provided for each teacher, asking them to administer the tests to those students who had parental consent and who wished to participate. The instructions on the questionnaire were to check one answer to each question. The questionnaire took 10-15 minutes to complete.

The same questionnaire was given each time except that six questions and a request for comments on the film or the questionnaire were added to the delayed posttest for the secondary school groups. Four of the questions were included for the elementary school sample. A copy of the questions is in Appendix A.

Results

Since most of the questions concerning viewers' reactions to the movie were asked only on the third test (after we had seen the film), all results will be taken from it unless otherwise stated. We have done some preliminary analyses on the three tests; there are some reliable changes, but they are relatively small and do not affect the conclusions drawn here. Focusing on the results of the third test is largely to facilitate clarity.

Viewing the film. Incidently none of our pretest participants indicated that they had seen the large screen premier. We could not discriminate on subsequent tests which version they had seen. Attendance was high among our sample; 95% of the secondary groups and 97% of the elementary group watched the film. Most saw it with their families; few saw it alone. The film was also discussed with a variety of people. There are some interesting and important grade differences in the viewing and discussion statistics that are summarized below. The senior high group seemed to have combined family and friends; the younger groups watched predominantly with their families. Most parents seemed to have talked with their offspring about the film although the percentage is somewhat lower for the junior high group than for the others. Note that a much smaller percentage

of elementary school children reported that they had talked about it with their teacher or in class than either of the older groups; 6% of the youngest group reported that they had not discussed it with anyone. A greater proportion of the oldest group also discussed the film with friends than the younger groups.

Watched the film with (percentages)

	Parents	Siblings	Friends	No One
SR	61	46	50	3
JR	81	57	19	7
EL	91	69	27	1

Talked about the film with (percentages)

	Parents	Siblings	Friends	Teacher or class	No One
SR	87	60	90	87	1
JR	78	36	67	89	3
EL	88	42	59	57	6

Who started it?. We asked, "In the movie, who started the war?" The responses and the percentage choosing each are given below:

Option	Senior high	Junior high	Elementary
America	6	4	3
China	0	0	0
Germany	7	5	7
Russia	19	35	31
Don't know	68	56	58

The instigator was purposfully left unclear in the movie, the younger groups have a stronger tendency to blame Russia than the senior high students, but all groups do to some extent.

The effects. At the end of the film, a printed statement that the effects of an actual nuclear war would be worse than those depicted in the film. We addressed that notion in the following question; the percentage of responses for each grade level are given in the columns to the right.

What do you think the movie tells you about what might happen in a nuclear war?

SR	JR	EL	
2	2	4	The movie makes things a whole lot worse than a real war would be.
4	2	10	The movie makes things a little worse than a real war would be.
10	10	13	The movie shows about what would happen.
17	9	27	A real war would be a little worse than the movie.
67	77	44	A real war would be a whole lot worse than the movie.

The elementary group hedged relative to the other two; they don't think that a nuclear war would be as devastating as the older groups. It is interesting to note that the youngest group also stated that more people in the world (although not in Lawrence) would survive a nuclear war than did the older groups.

Knowledge. We totalled the number of correct responses to the six questions about events in the film. The senior high group reliably answered more questions correctly that did the youngest group although all three groups were reasonably accurate, answering 4, 4.5, and 5 correctly for the elementary, junior, and senior high groups respectively. The question about radioactive fallout seemed the most frequently missed. Few of the participants even attempted the questions on the pretest so that we have no information about the students' knowledge about some of the basic facts such as fallout and flash effects prior to the film. Two of the questions were specific to the film, however, and these were answered correctly by the majority. Apparently, the students did learn from the film.

We also asked them to indicate how much they learned; the responses are given in percentages below: these data are available only from the third test. The correlation between scores on the knowledge test and how much the participants thought they had learned was not reliable nor even close. The amount the participants thought that they had learned decreased with level; also females indicated that they had learned more than males did, particularly at the senior high level.

How much did you learn from the movie "The Day After"?

	not much	a little	some	quite a bit	a lot
SR	15	25	32	25	4
JR	10	20	26	36	7
EL	10	7	28	38	18

How was the movie? We asked the participants some questions on the third test about their response to the film. These questions and responses are summarized below. The elementary school group rated it higher than the secondary groups did. At the elementary and junior high levels, the males gave it higher ratings than the females did, but the difference was reveresed at the senior high level.

How would you describe the movie "The Day After"?

	terrible	not bad	OK	good	great
SR	6	18	42	25	5
JR	8	18	37	36	1
EL	8	9	37	27	17

How frightened or upset were you by the movie "The Day After"?

	not at all	not much	some	quite a bit	a lot
SR	30	29	20	15	5
JR	24	26	32	10	8
EL	27	30	21	16	7

How many movies have you seen on television that were more frightening or upsetting than "The Day After"?

	none	not many	some	quite a few	a lot
SR	6	29	32	20	13
JR	10	33	28	22	7
EL	21	31	16	12	20

As the day after reports indicated, the response was not up to the pre-film publicity. Responses are scattered across the range of choices; the majority rated the film between OK and good. Most denied being unduly frightened or upset by the film, and there were no reliable grade differences on either question. The correlation between the last two questions was moderate and negative (-.4). Participants who considered the movie upsetting tended to say that they had seen fewer movies that were more upsetting than "The Day After", a predictable relationship. Another predictable relationship is a positive one between the degree of worry or concern about the possibility of nuclear war and how upsetting the movie was rated (r=.5). We also found a positive correlation between reporting the movie as upsetting and saying that they had learned from it.

Discussion and Summary

A number of results have been reviewed, and there are many more that have not been mentioned. The most obvious conclusion is that there are more similarities than differences. Sex and grade differences are largely a matter of degree rather than contrasting views.

Although we could not present the whole story, those participants who reported stronger reactions to the movie also tended to be more emotionally involved and concerned about the threat of nuclear war. Perhaps it is easier to view the film as simply Friday Fright Night fare if one is not involved in issues about nuclear weapons, escalation, and the threat of war. Both television and the movies are common sources of fantasy, doom, and horror. Many movies shown on the big screen and on tv are probably more frightening than "The Day After" if the latter has no basis for its reality. It is the potential for the horror of "The Day After" to be translated into reality by deliberate human action that is its horror.

And for some, that potential is not a horror. Some of our older students commented that our questionnaire is biased against

nuclear arms (and that is a weakness). If one regards nuclear war as a deterrent, then one might argue that vivid reminders of its consequences should emphasize its power and thus stay its use.

What happened to the film? Many who saw the big screen premier in Lawrence said that it was spooky, unnerving, terrifying. That did not seem to be the general impression for the small screen version. Maybe the horse went out the wrong door of the barn: trading big screens and big facilitating crowds for small screens, small groups, and the security of home may have combined to diminish the impact even in Lawrence. There is research available on such factors that is consistent with this hypothesis, but we have no way to test it with hindsight.

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